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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 YEREVAN 000287

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [GG](#) [AJ](#) [AM](#) [RU](#)

SUBJECT: RUSSIAN FM LAVROV: ARMENIA'S PLACE IS BY RUSSIA'S SIDE

REF: A) TBILISI 420 B) MOSCOW 1753

Classified By: CDA A.F. Godfrey for reasons 1.4 (b,d).

SUMMARY

1. (C) Armenia and Russia are "old friends, reliable allies and strategic partners" declared Russian FM Sergey Lavrov on February 17. The GOAM and Russia broke no new ground during the FM's high-profile visit to Yerevan February 16-17, but used the occasion to cement their existing strong relationship. Heading the list were Russia's security concerns, including a hard push for Armenia to limit its engagement with NATO, a confirmation of Russian and Armenian military cooperation, and a request for GOAM support for Russia's positions on international organization reforms, especially in the CIS, OSCE and UN. Armenia sought Russian commitments to improve regional economic and trade relations. Lavrov underscored Russia's continued support for the OSCE Minsk Group process to seek resolution of the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh. End Summary.

ARMENIAN WELCOME A CONTRAST TO TBILISI

2. (C) According to Senior Advisor to the Foreign Minister Salpi Ghazarian (AmCit), Lavrov arrived in Yerevan still smarting from Tbilisi's decision to downgrade his visit from "official" to "working" (ref A). Claiming that Lavrov's visit to Yerevan had originally been seen as the centerpiece of his Caucasus trip, Ghazarian noted that the necessity to add Baku to the trip and the Russian-Georgian tensions had detracted from what had been expected to be a visit essentially dedicated to highlighting close Armenian-Russian cooperation. Underlining Lavrov's ties to Armenia (including a previous visit to Yerevan in 1993 and an ethnic Armenian father) and the close, friendly nature of the Armenian-Russian relationship, Lavrov joined Foreign Minister Oskanian at President Kocharian's favorite jazz club in Yerevan, Poplavok (where Kocharian frequently takes VIP visitors). Lavrov's official schedule included a meeting with FM Oskanian, placing a wreath at the Genocide Memorial, an official lunch hosted by FM Oskanian including members of the National Assembly, a brief meeting with Prime Minister Markarian, an official meeting with President Kocharian, a joint presentation at the Russian-Armenian Slavonic University, and closed with a brief press conference at the MFA. Lavrov departed Yerevan after spending fewer than 24 hours on the ground.

PUSH-BACK ON NATO ISSUES

3. (C) According to Ghazarian, Lavrov pushed hard for Armenia to limit its cooperation with NATO and western military structures; Armenia needed to remember that its military relationship with Russia was central to its security. FM Oskanian reportedly responded that Armenia's growing relationship with NATO does not endanger its close ties to Russia, and that Armenia cannot let its neighbors, Georgia and Azerbaijan, move toward closer engagement with NATO without doing the same. Above all, Oskanian told Lavrov, Armenia cannot allow itself to be isolated and become a distant third in the race to integrate into western structures. Lavrov was reportedly unsatisfied with this response, and pressed for assurances that Russian-Armenian basing agreements and military cooperation would continue unchanged. According to both Ghazarian and Russian Embassy officials, FM Oskanian and President Kocharian gave him those assurances.

4. (C) Lavrov's visit was also designed to lay the groundwork for President Putin's upcoming March 7 visit to Yerevan, and Ghazarian noted that the GOAM expects that Putin will push harder for Armenia to get in line more clearly behind Russia.

CIS, OSCE, UN REFORM

15. (C) In his meetings with Kocharian and Oskanian, Lavrov reportedly asked for Armenia's support for Russia's proposed reforms of the CIS and the OSCE. According to Ghazarian, the changes to CIS structures would give Russia more influence in the internal affairs of other CIS countries. She claimed both Oskanian and Kocharian listened politely, but did not agree to support changes that would limit Armenia's de facto sovereignty. On OSCE reforms, however, the GOAM agrees with Russia that changes are necessary to limit OSCE's ability to "interfere" in the internal affairs of member nations, and would like to see the OSCE take a more active role in economic development issues and a much smaller one in human rights issues and electoral monitoring. According to Ghazarian, Lavrov secured the GOAM's commitment to continue to support Russia's positions in the OSCE. Lavrov also told Oskanian that Russia supports UN reform, including expanding the security council, but only if a consensus can be reached about precisely how that should be done -- a consensus that Lavrov told Oskanian he did not expect would come about.

CONTINUING RUSSIAN SUPPORT ON N-K

16. (C) In private meetings and in press statements, Lavrov made clear Russia's continued support for the OSCE Minsk Group process in resolving the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and pledged continued Russian support to block any attempt by Azerbaijan to move potential conflict settlement into any other arena, such as the UN. According to Ghazarian, there were no substantive new issues discussed on N-K during Lavrov's visit. Oskanian, in a press conference at the close of the visit, joked that Lavrov probably knew more about the Karabakh peace process than he did, and underlined Moscow's key role as an international mediator.

TRANSPORTATION, TRADE, ECONOMY

17. (C) During meetings with both Prime Minister Andranik Markarian and President Kocharian, GOAM officials raised transportation issues central to land-locked Armenia. Markarian expressed concern that a proposed railway link between Russia and Iran would bypass Armenia and run through Azerbaijan instead, increasing Armenia's isolation. The press reported that Lavrov assured Markarian that Russia would "take Armenia's interests into account" and not take any steps that would damage them. Russian Embassy Political Counselor Oleg Korobkov, however, stressed to us privately that Lavrov "made no promises." Lavrov said that the GOR continues to push to get the Kavkaz (Krasnodar Kray) - Poti rail ferry link on track, and commented briefly on the GOR's intention to consider opening the rail lines through Abkhazia, noting that Russia's interests in the region hinged on Armenia's continued access to Russian transportation links.

18. (C) PM Markarian raised the issue of five factories in Armenia which had been transferred to Russian ownership as part of a debt-for-equity swap. Markarian complained that the factories remain idle; part of the deal was that the new owners were to get them working. Again, Lavrov made no promises, but agreed to raise the matter with the appropriate authorities.

19. (C) Lavrov told the press that Russia hailed Armenia's development of economic relations with the Arab world and in particular welcomed the deal to build a natural gas pipeline from Iran to Armenia. Lavrov said that the "corresponding Russian structures" might participate in the project and hoped for a "definite reply" in the near future.

COMMENT: RUSSIA NOT IN DANGER OF LOSING ARMENIA

110. (C) The central message of Lavrov's brief visit to Armenia was clear: Russia counts on Armenia to be its ally in the Caucasus. Armenia recognizes its reliance -- even dependence -- on Russia's continued support on security and trade issues and will remain a loyal supporter of Russian policies where it counts. Russia can rely on continued Armenian support for its military presence and for the majority of its positions in international fora such as the OSCE. Armenia can count on Russia for its role as mediator in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Complementarity remains the watchword of Armenian foreign policy, but when push comes to shove, Russia remains Armenia's key ally.
GODFREY